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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of popular culture, relating it to new journalism as a phenomenon which reflects the popular images of society. Style is the essential element of popular culture so that the kind of writing presently known as new journalism is the ultimate example of the philosophy that style is supreme. But the style of the best new journalists is not only difficult to imitate, but difficult to analyze as well. The new media and modes are taking over; we look with our eyes but see with our minds. In this way, the fusion of idea and form creates style. This means a blurring of the old Cartesian categories and disciplines--art becomes what the artist proclaims it to be. (RB)

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POPULAR CULTURE AND THE NEW JOURNALISM

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POPULAR CULTURE AND THE NEW JOURNALISM

"My consumers, are they not my producers?"

James Joyce

Popular culture is neither a rock nor an island. It is a towering shimmering mass of raspberry jello.

No wonder Academics (strong on rocks, at home on islands) have trouble defining and teaching it. Those who profess or endorse popular culture generally hover under the ~~substantial~~ warm wing of the English or history department. They do not venture out into the cold too often. Out there things are trendy and tacky — beware. Beauty is truth and truth is beauty. That is all ye know, or need to know, to get tenure.

Journalism ranks higher on the pecking order; but not all <u>that</u> much higher. "Jour" is today; most scholars prefer yesterday. To put a colleagues' book down, label it "mere journalism;" this, like the popularity of the book itself, are Academic No-No's. Long ago Milton made it

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clear for whom we should write and teach: "The fit audience, though few."

Milton, and many of his followers. These elitists, who have long held sway, ~~and~~ oversaw every phase of my education. They taught me to wear, at an early age, the robes of Platonism -- the haute couture of Academia. Honor, Truth and Beauty were the goals; of these things the masses knew nothing. So I was told at the University of Virginia, where no one revealed to me what Thomas Jefferson (who founded it) thought of Plato:

> Why has the world so long consented to such nonsense? His foggy mind is forever presenting the semblances of objects which, half seen through a mist, can be defined neither in form or dimensions. [1]

So it was that my academic career was well advanced before I turned to the forms and dimensions that so occupy popular culture and the new journalism. Having been told what was "high" and "serious," I never dared inquire as to who can say what is "low" and frivolous"? Why not approach various aspects of the culture in which I supposedly had some expertize in terms that focus on themes and activities which make folk, popular, and elite culture

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1. Bernard Mayo, Jefferson Himself (Boston, 1942), p. 301

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possible? How, for example, do elements of "popular" culture relate to other (unpopular?) ones; and in what sense does the "new" journalism spring from the old? How do pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fit together? [2.]

We must beware of semantics. Proclaiming something "popular" or "new" is old hat. Every generation discovers its New Look, and makes popular points from the New Freedom, New Deal, or New Frontier. Applying the adjective "new" doesn't eliminate the noun's past connections. It might even accentuate them -- as with the New Muckrakers.

The ancient Greeks knew there is nothing new under the sun. They also knew that Whirl is king; that people are obsessed with change and variety. Not only the voice of the turtle but also the clang of culture is heard throughout the land. Though the concept of culture came into vogue only after 1750, it has become protean in its meanings and applications. A decade ago, two anthropologists listed 164 "definitions of culture;" no one has even guessed how many more could now be added to the

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2. Many others have raised the question in recent months. One of the best summaries is Benjamin DeMott's article on "The Culture Wars," in Saturday Review, May 20, 1972. Endless bickering about "high" and "low" culture, DeMott points out, ranks as the most wasteful activity on the contemporary intellectual scene.

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list.[3] Of course their inclination to include a spoon as well as a symphony under the heading "culture" would offend those who seek only "the best that has been thought and said." F.R. Leavis even suggests that "culture" and "civilization" are coming to be antithetical terms.[4]

Let us not get caught in the quicksands of semantics. However one defines "culture," there is a large, recognizable body of material in print, fil , videotape, and records that IS popular, and NOT elite or ac emic. Something HAS happened in the area known as journalism. Writers have abandoned the ratio and objective reporting that had become cultic. The emphasis is on subjectivity and "getting inside" the story or event. We are confronted, says Michael Johnson in The New Journalism , with "a new consciousness, a larger, more varied, and more comple sense of the immediate human situation."[5]

There is as yet no consensus as to just what the New Journa is, and who best represents it. But of this there is no doubt: i exists, and flourishes: a vital, creative effort to rethink and restate who and what we are in the 1970's.

3. Clyde Kluckhohn and A.D. Kroeber, Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions (New York, Vintage, 1963).

4. F.R. Leavis, "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture," in Education and the University (London, Faber, 1968), p. 164.

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Discovering the father (or grandfather, or great-grandfather) of the new movement is becoming a standard indoor academic sport. When Ben Franklin came to colonial Philadelphia, wasn't he determined to become a New Journalist? And what about Addison and Steele, or Daniel Dafoe, before him? Wasn't Mark Twain (who insisted on calling Henry James "Henrietta") the kind of roughneck-writer that has become the darling of the Counter-Culture? What about Lincoln Steffins, showing the cities' shame, or iconoclastic H.L. Mencken, socking it to farmers and the booboisee? Is there a better statement of "getting inside" than that of Joseph Conrad, prefacing The Nigger of the Narcissus

> "My task, which I am trying to achieve by the power of the written word, is to make you hear, to make you feel. It is, before all, to make you see."

To do that takes STYLE. That, rather than semantics or sociology, is the key both to popular culture and the New

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5. Michael Johnson, The New Journalism (University of Kansas, 1971), p. 152. There had been some early warning signals several years earlier - for example, Nat Hentoff's piece called "Behold the New Journalism - It's Coming After You!" in the July, 1968 issue Evergreen Review. Everette E. Dennis' The Magic Writing Machine: Student Probes of the New Journalism came out in 1971, and Curtis D. Mac Dougall's Interpretative Reporting in 1972. The pros and cons are summed up by Ronald Weber, The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy (Hastings House, 1974). Ron Marmarelli, at Temple University, is compiling a full-scale bibliography of the New Journalism.

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Journalism.

If you don't want to take my word for it, how about that of the Founding Father, Tom Wolfe? Even when he was an undergraduate (I know this, because I was one of his teachers), he did term papers with titles like "A Zoofull of Zebras." Later on he made it big with stories about drag-racing, merry-making, and the open road. Always style was essential. "Practically every style recorded in art history is the result of the same thing," Wolfe declared, "a lot of attention to form, plus the money to make monuments of it. For centuries it has been something the aristocracy has been responsible for. Since World War II the pattern has been broken. Suddenly classes of people whose styles of life had been practically invisible had the money to built the monuments of their own style. One was Las Vegas- the Versailles of America."

In such a statement, such an insight, popular culture and new journalism not only overlap, but merge.

But there are many other indications of internal similarity and intertwining. Some of the major ones are:

1. Both are subversive, challenging the status quo and "Establishment" in society, government, media, and university.
2. Both depend on "the puts-" put-downs and put-ons. Figures as different as Will Rogers, W.C. Fields, Jimmy Breslin, Hunter Thompson, and Fritz the Cat show us the absurdity of the "normal" and assumed. Through their work we see in, under, and around.

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3. And to what end? ENTERTAINMENT. Measured by what standard of success? $.
4. NOW is the time, and IN is the preposition. Old journalists strove for "scoops," but New Journalists seek "inside information." But no one knows what will be "in," or when he will get "inside." "When you're Hot You're Hot/ When you're Not, you're Not."
5. Transience breeds tension, disappointment, despair. Some of our most popular entertainers commit suicide: Marilyn Monroe, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, etc. Everyone wants to write for Ramparts: then no one is even reading it
6. Specificity is supreme. We want hard, tangible, exploitable images, material, insights....something different and divert no matter how small or trivial it might be. If there is a "theology" in this passion it is summed up by Paul Tillich: "God is in the details."
7. Style is supreme. When a singer, actor, or writer has "real style," we can overlook or forgive almost anything. Who cares what Sinatra sings, or Groucho says? "It Ain't Whatcha Do, It's the Way that you Do It."

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If style is supreme, it is also elusive. Those who have it don't often discuss it; those who discuss it usually don't have it. Style begets style. One successful situation comedy or drama has instant imitators. Sometimes the repetition can be literal, as in Tom Wolfe's famous 1965 essay beginning:

> ernia, hernia, hernia, hernia, hernia, hernia
> HERNia, hernia, HERNia, hernia, hernia, hernia,
> hernia, HERNia, HERNIA, hernia....

This apparently meaningless repetition -- actually a quotation from a space out observer catching the "running singsong" of the dealers at Lav Vegas crap tables--is a brilliant example of a New Journalist ZAPPING his readers with his insights, his style. The hernia sound, Wolfe goes on to explain in a baroque burst (a Put-On? Put-down? Or both?):

> "is part of something rare and rather grand: a combination of baroque stimuli that brings to mind the bronze gongs, no longer than a blue plate, that Louis XIV, his ruff collars larded with the lint of the foul Old City of Byzantium, personally hunted out in the bazaars of Asia Minor to provide exotic acoustics for his new palace outside Paris."

Time and again, Wolfe and the other New Journalists show that not only imitation, but sequence and judgment are

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essential to style; and that style is ultimately symbolic.[6.]

Style is a form of model-building : change the model and you change the style. The mental image of a person's style is the person himself. Style-models (and hence, popular images) act on our visual memory like a drug, stimulating sensitivity and arousing memories. "Ah yes, I remember it well..."

The style of the best New Journalists is not only hard to imitate, but to analyze. Some external characteristics are obvious enough: special topography, interior monologues, weird grammar, interjections. There may even be new words: mysterioso, trickology, kidification. Style is much deeper than this. It remains today what it has always been: a mystery.

Elitists have declared a style-monopoly for "their team--" even though some of them with the greatest style (like Van Gogh, Mozart, or Rembrant) have all but starved to death from lack of understanding or support during their lifetime. How many

6. Henrich Wolffling, Joseph Margolis, Carl Friedrich, and John R. Martinwold have written extensivly about style. Two books that open up new vistas are George Kubler, The Shape of Time (New Haven, Yale, 1962) and Edward White, The Pop Culture Tradition (New York, Norton, 1972).

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academicians are willing to discuss stylistic achievements of Walt Disney or Charles Schultz; of Bob Dylan, the Moody Blues, Art Buchwald, or Hunter Thompson?

The style of these people cannot to caught in footnotes, confirmed in bibliographies. They come upon us like lightning, followed by thunder. When Groucho Marx was in his prime, he was like a black panther stalking the land: swift, certain, stylish. Even his shadow could make us shudder with delight.

Consider the world of the animated cartoon: cloud-cuckoo-land, full of delightfully impossible violence. It doesn't tell us about our visceral, irrational, yet still hopeful times; it is those times. Fatal mutilations are healed in adjacent frames; serpents swallow their ouwn tails and survive; the American Dream is paraded and parodied.

Such cartoons are part of a new imagistic culture whose very existence, not to mention potency, our literary intellectuals have missed. New media and modes are taking over, proving what even Plato knew and acknowledged: the human mind is not a debating hall but a picture gallery. We look with our eyes but see with our minds. That is how the fusion of idea and form creates

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style. With the sense of sight, the idea communicates the emotion.

This means, of course, a blurring of old Cartesian categories and disciplines. Art becomes what the artist proclaims it to be. Popular music is a pot pourri of jazz, blues, country, Western, rock 'n' roll, baroque, and ballad, convering and merging in new unpredictable ways.[7] Bobby sock, raga rock, tick tock hickory dock. No wonder the cow jumped over the moon, and the astronaut played golf on its surface. Even the sacred segregating walls of science are cumbling. How does one prepare for a "field" like cybernetics, bionics, or decision-theory?

Style is a dye which colors the total fabric, seeping into cell and crevice, affecting the warp and woof of society. It saturates not only paintings and institutions, but also people and incidents. Look into your old photo album, then into the mirror. What in the world has happened?

Slowly, mysteriously, the dye (and hence the style) changes. No one knows when or why. (When did Rome decline? Why did a style spring up on Crete? In Timbuktu? Why and where did the Renaissance begin? Or the Industrial Revolution? And on and on.)

7. Music is one of the areas of real triumph for the newly-emerging popular style. For a discussion of ingredients, see Donald Lyrus Ballads, Blues, and the Big Beat (New York, Dell, 1967); and R. Serge Denisoff, Sing a Song of Social Significance (Bowling Green Popular Press, 1972).

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Style is both extrinsic and intrinsic. The outward form is tradition. What sustains and supports it? No one tried more persistently, more heroically, than James Joyce to supply an answer. He called it Ulysses: the analysis of a single day (June 16, 1904) in a single spot (Dublin, Ireland). The ultima in elitism, from one viewpoint, the novel is also a compendium of concrete popular culture-- a pinpointed look at daily events, reports on the foot-and-mouth disease, street signs, and numbered bus tickets. Yet (like the world in which all of us live), it is slightly out of focus. A bass baritone becomes a base barrel-tone, and a character can shout:

> "As Oliover Krumwell sayed when he slepped ueber his grannymother, Kangaroose feathers! Who in the name of hunder'd ever belevin you were that bolt?"

By splintering spellings and sequences, Joyce forced us rethink our experience. But who has thought much of how he has affected the Globemasters of our new Global Village (Marshal Mc Luhan) -- or for that matter the whole area we loosely label New Journalism?

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From Descartes through Kissinger, Western thought was (and in Academia, still is) dominated by rationalism, compartmentalism, and the notion of progress. But -- as both popular culture and the New Journalism plainly show --popular support for these notions is dwindling. Investigation, ridiculing, and house-wrecking are the order of the day. Paradox prevails; the old myths die. We no longer think of spectator sports, billboards, lp records, and neon sigsn as part of T.S. Eliot's Wasteland. Instead, they are raw material for visual involvement, and a new style-frontier. Tom Wolfe is the Daniel Boone who let us into the Las Vegas frontier, keeping a diary with a title that would have made James Joyce chuckle: The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby.

Trade Versailles for Las Vegas? Never, the traditionalist vows. But Versailles is dead (despite the restoration efforts of the Rockefellers); Las Vegas is jumping. Style comes where the act is. We didn't choose Las Vegas: Las Vegas chose us. Hernia Hernia hernia HERNia hernia, HERNIA.

The frontier spirit, clearly defined by Frederick Jackson

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Turner in 1893, didn't die once we reached the Pacific, or even the moon. Today it is the crowded city, or the polluted lake, that demands heroic action and initiative. Having mastered the Colorado and the Columbia rivers, we must prepare for crucial battles along the Potomac and Hudson. Weeding and watering the landscape of the mind, we may find an America that looks ever less like a Currier and Ives landscape, and ever more like a Jules Feiffer cartoon; a country which has no more William S. Hart's and Tom Mix's, but is overrun with Midnight Cowboys.

We need singers, entertainers, and writers who can articulate actual structures of feeling, in a style befitting our times and tasks. It will take sharp knives to cut through the crud and cultural blubber. That is the task confronting the New Journalism in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Marshall W. Fishwick